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Retreat From a Secrecy Madness

Still protesting that Congress doesn't appreciate the peril to national security, the Reagan Administration is nevertheless retreating from its reckless hunt for leaks and leakers. At least for now, it has shelved the sweeping order imposing an unconscionable lifetime censorship on Federal employees and terrorizing normally trusted public servants with random lie-detector examinations.

Not being privy to the Administration's ultimate political secrets, we don't know what prompted this change of heart about treating the whole Government as if it were the Central Intelligence Agency. But the retreat is plainly tactical, not a conversion to openness. Congress, which blocked the order when it first appeared, cannot relax its vigilance.

It would be pleasant to conclude from this episode that President Reagan now understands that his problem about secrets is that there are too many of them, not too few; that a Government spinning wheels to chase minor leaks disables itself in real

security matters; that censoring the writings of top officials — for life — will deprive the nation of able workers now and vital criticism in the future.

Congress was properly unimpressed with the Administration's specious alarm and narrow response. No less committed to effective government, it demanded evidence of the danger from uncensored articles by former officials. The search produced nothing of consequence.

Since the White House cannot see the light, it is good that the President's men at least felt the heat. The directive was becoming a political liability for an Administration that boasts of openness. If Mr. Reagan had refused to rewrite this chilling directive, Congress would have done the job.

The best response to the President's retreat is for Congress to renew its order forbidding any executive action on this front until it is given a new proposal. Then let the White House show, if it can, that there is any conceivable security risk that can justify any restriction on the rights of Government employees and the public's right to hear their views when they return to private life.

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